

THE FUTURE OF WORK

The New Working Class

Automation Nation

Realizing a U

DIVISIONS OF LABOR

New kinds of work require new ideas – and new ways of organizing.

By BARBARA EHRENREICH FEB. 23, 2017

The working class, or at least the white part, has emerged as our great national mystery. Traditionally Democratic, they helped elect a flamboyantly ostentatious billionaire to the presidency. “What’s wrong with them?” the liberal pundits keep asking. Why do they believe Trump’s promises? Are they stupid or just deplorably racist? Why did the working class align itself against its own interests?

I was born into this elusive class and remain firmly connected to it through friendships and family. In the 1980s, for example, I personally anchored a working-class cultural hub in my own home on Long Island. The attraction was not me but my husband (then) and longtime friend Gary Stevenson, a former warehouse worker who had become an organizer for the Teamsters union. You may think of the Long Island suburbs as a bedroom community for Manhattan commuters or a portal to the Hamptons, but they were then also an industrial center, with more than 20,000 workers employed at Grumman alone. When my sister moved into our basement from Colorado, she quickly found a job in a factory within a mile of our house, as did thousands of other people, some of them bused in from the Bronx. Mostly we hosted local residents who passed through our house for evening meetings or weekend gatherings — truck drivers, factory workers, janitors and eventually nurses. My job was to make chili and keep room in the fridge for the baked goods others would invariably bring. I once tried to explain the

8

ARTICLES REMAINING

Register now to save, comment and share on NYTimes.com.

By the time my little crew was gathering in the ranch house, working-class aspirations were everywhere being trampled underfoot. In 1981, President Reagan busted the air traffic controllers' union by firing more than 11,000 striking workers — a clear signal of what was to come. A few years later, we hosted a picnic for Jim Guyette, the leader of a militant meatpacking local in Minnesota that had undertaken a wildcat strike against Hormel (and of course no Hormel products were served at our picnic). But labor had entered into an age of givebacks and concessions. Grovel was the message, or go without a job. Even the “mighty mighty” unions of the old labor chant, the ones that our little group had struggled both to build and to democratize, were threatened with extinction. Within a year, the wildcat local was crushed by its own parent union, the United Food and Commercial Workers.

Steel mills went quiet, the mines where my father and grandfather had worked shut down, factories fled south of the border. Much more was lost in the process than just the jobs; an entire way of life, central to the American mythos, was coming to an end. The available jobs, in fields like retail sales and health care, were ill paid, making it harder for a man without a college education to support a family on his own. I could see this in my own extended family, where the grandsons of miners and railroad workers were taking jobs as delivery-truck drivers and fast-food restaurant managers or even competing with their wives to become retail workers or practical nurses. As Susan Faludi observed in her 1999 book “Stiffed,” the deindustrialization of America led to a profound masculinity crisis: What did it mean to be a man when a man could no longer support a family?

It wasn't just a way of life that was dying but also many of those who had lived it. Research in 2015 by Angus Deaton, a Nobel laureate in economics, with his wife, Anne Case, showed that the mortality gap between college-educated whites and non-college-educated whites had been widening rapidly since 1999. A couple of

8

ARTICLES REMAINING

 Register now to save, comment and share on NYTimes.com.

THE FUTURE OF WORK

The New Working Class

Automation Nation

Realizing a L

could account for only a third of the excess deaths. The rest were apparently attributable to alcoholism, drug overdoses and suicide, usually by gunshot — what are often called “diseases of despair.”

In the new economic landscape of low-paid service jobs, some of the old nostrums of the left have stopped making sense. “Full employment,” for example, was the mantra of the unions for decades, but what did it mean when so many jobs no longer paid enough to live on? The idea had been that if everyone who wanted a job could get one, employers would have to raise wages to attract new workers. But when I went out as an undercover journalist in the late 1990s to test the viability of entry-level jobs, I found my co-workers — waitstaff, nursing-home workers, maids with a cleaning service, Walmart “associates” — living for the most part in poverty. As I reported in the resulting book, “Nickel and Dimed,” some were homeless and slept in their cars, while others skipped lunch because they couldn’t afford anything more than a snack-size bag of Doritos. They were full-time workers, and this was a time, like the present, of nearly full employment.

The other popular solution to the crisis of the working class was job retraining. If ours is a “knowledge economy” — which sounds so much better than a “low-wage economy” — unemployed workers would just have to get their game on and upgrade to more useful skills. President Obama promoted job retraining, as did Hillary Clinton as a presidential candidate, along with many Republicans. The problem was that no one was sure what to train people in; computer skills were in vogue in the ’90s, welding has gone in and out of style and careers in the still-growing health sector are supposed to be the best bets now. Nor is there any clear measure of the effectiveness of existing retraining programs. In 2011, the Government Accountability Office found the federal government supporting 47 job-training projects as of 2009, of which only five had been evaluated in the previous five years. Paul Ryan has repeatedly praised a program in his hometown, Janesville, Wis., but a 2012 ProPublica study found that laid-off people who went

8

ARTICLES REMAINING

Register now to save, comment and share on NYTimes.com.

THE FUTURE OF WORK

The New Working Class

Automation Nation

Realizing a L

change in the job market is probably not realistic and certainly not respectful of existing skills. In the early '90s, I had dinner at a Pizza Hut with a laid-off miner in Butte, Mont. (actually, there are no other kinds of miners in Butte). He was in his 50s, and he chuckled when he told me that he was being advised to get a degree in nursing. I couldn't help laughing too — not at the gender incongruity but at the notion that a man whose tools had been a pickax and dynamite should now so radically change his relation to the world. No wonder that when blue-collar workers were given the choice between job retraining, as proffered by Clinton, and somehow, miraculously, bringing their old jobs back, as proposed by Trump, they went for the latter.

Now when politicians invoke “the working class,” they are likely to gesture, anachronistically, to an abandoned factory. They might more accurately use a hospital or a fast-food restaurant as a prop. The new working class contains many of the traditional blue-collar occupations — truck driver, electrician, plumber — but by and large its members are more likely to wield mops than hammers, and bedpans rather than trowels. Demographically, too, the working class has evolved from the heavily white male grouping that used to assemble at my house in the 1980s; black and Hispanic people have long been a big, if unacknowledged, part of the working class, and now it's more female and contains many more immigrants as well. If the stereotype of the old working class was a man in a hard hat, the new one is better represented as a woman chanting, “El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!” (The people united will never be defeated!)

The old jobs aren't coming back, but there is another way to address the crisis brought about by deindustrialization: Pay all workers better. The big labor innovation of the 21st century has been campaigns seeking to raise local or state minimum wages. Activists have succeeded in passing living-wage laws in more than a hundred counties and municipalities since 1994 by appealing to a simple sense of justice: Why should someone work full time, year-round, and not make

8

ARTICLES REMAINING

Register now to save, comment and share on NYTimes.com.

THE FUTURE OF WORK

The New Working Class

Automation Nation

Realizing a L

sometimes backed by unions and sometimes by philanthropic foundations — Our Walmart, the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United.

Our old scene on Long Island is long gone: the house sold, the old friendships frayed by age and distance. I miss it. As a group, we had no particular ideology, but our vision, which was articulated through our parties rather than any manifesto, was utopian, especially in the context of Long Island, where if you wanted any help from the county, you had to be a registered Republican. If we had a single theme, it could be summed up in the old-fashioned word “solidarity”: If you join my picket line, I’ll join yours, and maybe we’ll all go protest together, along with the kids, at the chemical plant that was oozing toxins into our soil — followed by a barbecue in my backyard. We were not interested in small-P politics. We wanted a world in which everyone’s work was honored and every voice heard.

I never expected to be part of anything like that again until, in 2004, I discovered a similar, far-better-organized group in Fort Wayne, Ind. The Northeast Indiana Central Labor Council, as it was then called, brought together Mexican immigrant construction workers and the native-born building-trade union members they had been brought in to replace, laid-off foundry workers and Burmese factory workers, adjunct professors and janitors. Their goal, according to the president at the time, Tom Lewandowski, a former General Electric factory worker who served in the 1990s as the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s liaison to the Polish insurgent movement Solidarnosc, was to create a “culture of solidarity.” They were inspired by the realization that it’s not enough to organize people with jobs; you have to organize the unemployed as well as the “anxiously employed” — meaning potentially the entire community. Their not-so-secret tactic was parties and picnics, some of which I was lucky enough to attend.

The scene in Fort Wayne featured people of all colors and collar colors, legal and undocumented workers, liberals and political conservatives, some of whom

8

ARTICLES REMAINING

Register now to save, comment and share on NYTimes.com.

THE FUTURE OF WORK

The New Working Class

Automation Nation

Realizing a L

obscure bureaucratic imperatives. But the labor council was undaunted. It promptly reinvented itself as the Workers' Project and drew more than 6,000 people to the local Labor Day picnic, despite having lost its internet access and office equipment to the A.F.L.-C.I.O.

When I last talked to Tom Lewandowski, in early February, the Workers' Project had just succeeded in organizing 20 Costco contract workers into a collective unit of their own and were planning to celebrate with, of course, a party. The human urge to make common cause — and have a good time doing it — is hard to suppress.

Barbara Ehrenreich is the founding editor of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project and the author of numerous books, including "Nickel and Dimed."

Sign up for our newsletter to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.

A version of this article appears in print on February 26, 2017, on Page MM27 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Divisions of Labor.

© 2017 The New York Times Company

8

ARTICLES REMAINING

Register now to save, comment and share on NYTimes.com.